

Understanding by Design Big Idea: Understandings

An understanding in UbD is a specific inference the teacher wants students to draw, realize, or grasp, based on the teaching and learning. It is an insight that links the particular facts and skills to "big ideas" in meaningful and transferable ways. An understanding is thus a specific generalization, a full-sentence statement that summarizes an insight that a student is expected to take away from the work.

Here are some pointers about framing and working with understandings, cast in frequently-asked-questions form:

Q: Should we tell students the understandings we want them to have?

A: It really depends on the desired understandings. Any understanding, by definition, is not obvious to students. Understandings must be "uncovered," not "covered"—that is, inferred, grasped, discovered, and constructed by students, with the aid of the teacher and well-designed learning experiences.

In fact, many understandings are counterintuitive and prone to constant misunderstanding. The more the understanding is unobvious, counterintuitive, complex, or abstract, the greater the likelihood of misunderstanding if the understanding is treated as a fact.

The point of the UbD template is to help the designer be more explicit about ends and means: The audience for the template is yourself and your teaching colleagues—not the learner. If you want students to discover or realize a conclusion or an interpretation on their own, then you will subvert your goals by telling them what you want them to discover or realize.

Even if you decide that it's OK for students to hear the desired understandings and consider them as they work (as we might do in a performance area, e.g., "Creating space and exploiting it leads to more goals being scored"), you cannot just state a desired insight and expect students to get it. The point would merely be to alert them to something they will gradually understand and know how to do based on the learning activities and their analysis of them.

Q: But isn't the whole point of the W in WHERE to help students know where they are headed?

A: Well, yes, but it does not follow that you should tell them in advance what you have written in Stage 1. (Why would you tell students the key issues and meanings in a book before they read it?) The plan for teaching, outlined in Stage 3, is where you specify just what your teaching role will

and will not be when with students. Students are usually better served by fewer speeches about learning goals and more concrete information in handouts about how the unit's purposes are to be realized (i.e., knowledge of the performance requirements, rubrics, anchor papers, etc.).

Q: Isn't it counter to the whole idea of understanding that the teacher states what the particular understandings are supposed to end up being? Does that mean that student-generated ideas have no place?

A: Your point is well taken, but consider the reality of teaching and curriculum frameworks. As teachers, there are particular understandings that we want the novice learner to come to. We want them to understand that the Civil War was not primarily about the evils of slavery and that the phases of the moon do not represent unending eclipses, even though common sense says so. Our job as professionals is, in part, to help students move toward expert understanding—when such consensus exists—or toward more sophisticated opinions when there is no expert consensus.

If the essential questions have been well framed and linked to the understandings, and if the assessments make our intent to generate inquiry clear, there should be no mixed message. Indeed, part of our job is to help students grasp that understandings are not facts but arguable and defensible inferences from analysis of facts or actions.

Q: What if the aim of the unit is to help students see that there is no right answer where they expect one, that there are many different understandings of the same facts, and that the whole point is to come to that realization—and to arrive at their own defensible understanding?

A: Then, the understandings should be stated that way on the template, in Box U, Stage 1.

Examples:

- "Historians still disagree about the key causes and effects of the Civil War, and students will understand that not only are there plausible alternatives but also that one's views are often affected by one's place of origin and local culture."
- "Determining which number system and degree of precision to use in a particular context is a matter of judgment in terms of efficient and effective problem solving, not the mechanical application of some rule."

Q: What are some tips on writing robust understandings that take writing them beyond onerous chore to helpful insight?

A: Ask yourself, What is the "moral of the story" of my unit? Given the topic and the unfolding of the content, what specific priority insights do I expect students to leave with?

The moral of the story is a useful analogy. The writer of a story doesn't broadcast or didactically state the most vital meanings. We as teachers ask the question to push readers to interpret the text and justify an interpretation. It's the same thing here: We are pushing you to be more explicit about the intellectual point of the unit and your reading of the content you teach.

Here are some other tips:

- Avoid vague generalities (e.g., "America is a complex country" or "Writing involves many different elements"). Surely, the point of the unit is more intellectually interesting and pointed than such phrases. What is noteworthy about that complexity? What are the key but often overlooked elements of writing? The paradoxical requirement is that you need to be as specific as you can be about the transferable generalizations you want to offer on the topic (e.g., "Successful writers have great control over language and its impact, and they really know their audiences and what makes them tick").
- Avoid truisms. Truisms are statements true by definition (e.g., "Triangles have three sides") or obvious implications of an idea (e.g., "Wars disrupt normal patterns of living" or "Musicians work with sounds to create music"). Try to summarize the particular insights you are after in studying such content (e.g., "All congruent triangles are similar but not all similar triangles are congruent" or "War rarely disrupts the lives of those who wage it as much as the citizen who must cope within it" or "The silence is as important as the notes in making music come alive"). Proposing a truism as an understanding is like only offering a definition of a word instead of a statement suggesting the importance of the concept represented by the word.
- State all of your desired understandings as "Students will understand that..." Because the understanding is a particular insight, it should be stated that way. Most curricular frameworks, standards documents, and teacher lesson plans, however, make the mistake of framing understandings as broad topics to be taught (e.g., "Students will understand gravitational force") rather than as the learnings that should result from the topic being studied (e.g., "Students will understand that gravity is not a physical property but a description of how matter, large and small, behaves, based on Newton's Laws").
- Consider the questions begged by writing the understanding differently. Instead of saying, "The students will understand that the Civil War was fought initially over states' rights issues and regional

economic politics, not the morality of slavery," the designer often unwittingly ends up merely restating the topic: "Students will understand

- Why the Civil War was fought. (Why was it fought?)
- How the war was won and lost. (How was it won?)
- Which side had the most to gain and the most to lose from war. (Which side and why?)
- How to analyze primary source documents on the Civil War. (What understandings does this lead to about research and the topic?)"
- Avoid using the word understand when you really mean knowledge or skill (e.g., "Students will understand how to multiply two-digit numbers"). If the desired learning only requires the doing of the activity or the recall of the facts, then avoid using the word understand as a goal. Reserve it for those learnings that involve the more inferential, abstract, and questionable ideas and issues deriving from facts and skills.

Note that there are important understandings in the use of skill, something we tend to overlook in skill development. You don't become a successful writer by only knowing how to write five-paragraph essays. You learn to write when you understand that most so-called rules of writing are merely tips or scaffolds meant to be discarded when you really know your audience and your purpose. (That last sentence is such an understanding about the skill of writing five-paragraph essays.)

Put differently, intellectual power and creativity with knowledge can only arise when the learner grasps the principle or reason behind the training in technique, rule, or format—whether we are talking writing, reading, sports, or the arts.

So, state the desired knowledge and skills in Box K and the understandings about the use of such knowledge and skill in Box U.